

Redefining the Sherlock Holmes Canon as an Imperial Construct

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ABSTRACT: Though Arthur Conan Doyle's Orientalism and imperial advocacy can be found in most of the fifty-six short stories and four novels about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, they appear to be most pronounced in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), *The Sign of Four* (1890), *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* (1892) and *The Adventure of the Three Students* (1904). When Doyle was composing his first Sherlock Holmes story in 1886-7, he would have naturally been influenced by the past and contemporary social and political conditions of England and the world. Even more critical was Doyle's knowledge that Great Britain's position as a colonial superpower had begun to face stiff challenges from other imperialists like France, Germany and Spain from the second half of nineteenth century and onwards.

KEYWORDS: Detective Fiction; Canon; Imperial Construct

I. INTRODUCTION:

Though Arthur Conan Doyle's Orientalism and imperial advocacy can be found in most of the fifty-six short stories and four novels about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, they appear to be most pronounced in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), *The Sign of Four* (1890), *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* (1892) and *The Adventure of the Three Students* (1904). When Doyle was composing his first *Sherlock Holmes* story in 1886-7, he would have naturally been influenced by the past and contemporary social and political conditions of England and the world. These included the Anglo-Sikh War (1845), the Irish Potato famine (1845), the Crimean War (1854-56), the Indian Sepoy Mutiny (1857), the American and Afghan Civil Wars of 1861 and 1863, the foundation of the xenophobic Ku Klux Klan in the United States of America (1865), beginning of Prussian Expansion (1864) and of the primary ideas of Communism (1867), the Franco-Prussian War (1870), Victoria's becoming the Empress of India (1877), and the Zulu War (1879).

Even more critical was Doyle's knowledge that Great Britain's position as a colonial superpower had begun to face stiff challenges from other imperialists like France, Germany and Spain from the second half of nineteenth century and onwards. Simultaneously, the British colonies like India, Afghanistan and South Africa initiated their violent resistance of the British colonialism. Added to these were the upheavals created by Friedrich Engel's *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) and the first volume of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867) that seriously questioned Britain's capitalistic manoeuvres and, in extension, indicated their imminent end. Writing in the background of the contemporary social and political conditions of rethinking and repositioning, Doyle identifiably attempted to present a calm and stolid face of the imperial centre to the colonies. That is precisely why Sherlock Holmes protects the British imperial interests and disciplines the erratic Oriental subaltern and the White individuals associated with them, without being bothered by the contemporary socio-political changes. He feigns an impression that Britain's political stability and colonising potentialities are at their highest more during the late Victorian period than ever.

Influence of Scientific and Technological Inventions and Discoveries : While working out the *Sherlock Holmes* narratives Doyle also shows the influence of the contemporary scientific and technological discoveries and inventions. These included the discovery of the planet Neptune in 1846, the Foucaultian demonstration of Earth's rotation with a pendulum in 1851, the establishment of the telegraph system in India in 1853, the commencement of trans-Atlantic cable in 1857, the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* in 1859 and 1871 respectively, the construction of the first practical internal combustion engine by Lenoir in 1860, the inauguration of the Metropolitan underground-railway in London in 1863 (though the first deep tube railroad began operating in 1884), the invention of telephone and phonograph respectively in 1876 and 1877, and Thomas Alva Edison's

patenting the incandescent lamp in 1879. Sherlock Holmes' deep interest in science and technology does not only reflect the litterateur's confidence in the late Victorian and Edwardian sciences but also perceptively attests Said's observation that according to the European colonisers "the Orient was being outstripped and outdated by Western science" and was "exploited by the developing sciences" (Said, *Orientalism* 65, 40). The post-colonialist has thus underscored the role of the European scientists in the domination of the Orient. Doyle's obsession with the colonies and his constant advocacy of the "pacification of the subject race" is an example of his "imperial might" and his adherence to the basic imperial formula: "There are Westerners, and there are Orientals [...] The former dominates; the latter must be dominated [...]" (Said, *Orientalism*, 36)

Said has also pointed out why the British detective gives primacy to rationality.

the European [,] [according to the Western philosophy] [,] is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism (Said, *Orientalism* 38).

The pictures painted in stories like *The Sign of Four* (Doyle 82-92) and *The Adventure of the Crooked Man* (Doyle 365-6) serve to portray the general European conception about the demeanour of the Orientals. To the White imperialists, the Eastern subaltern populace are:

gullible, devoid of energy and initiative, much given to fulsome flattery, intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals...[they] cannot walk on either a road or a pavement...[they are] inveterate liars...lethargic and suspicious... and in everything oppose the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race (Said, *Orientalism* 38-9).

The archetypal representation of the colonized coloured people in Western literature has progressively influenced the Whiter Westerners' distorted knowledge about them. In the *Sherlock Holmes* canon, Doyle repeatedly attempts to "polarise the distinction (between the West and the East) [...] and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions and societies" (Said, *Orientalism*, 46). A transgressor of this polarisation, like Dr. Grimesby Roylott of *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, is annihilated.

II. ORIENTALISM

By practising prejudice against the colonised populace, particularly those from the East, Doyle was only following the "universal practice of designating in [his] mind a familiar space which [according to him] is ours and unfamiliar space beyond ours which is theirs", though such geographical distinctions, to Said, are "entirely arbitrary" (Said, *Orientalism* 54). In this space was placed the erroneous ideas that Asia exudes the "feelings of emptiness, loss, and disaster", that it is "defeated and distant", and that the motif of the Orient "insinuates danger" and its excesses "undermine rationality" (Said, *Orientalism*, 56-57). The experience of the authors with such ideas leads to the building up of an "internally structured archive from the literature that belongs to these experiences" (Said, *Orientalism*, 58).

Said's *Orientalism* explains why Watson should be a former British settler and physician with elaborate Oriental experiences. He writes, "[...] To be a European in the Orient, and to be one knowledgably, one must see and know the Orient as a domain ruled over by Europe." (Said *Orientalism*, 197). Most of the early English Orientalists in India, just as Watson has had been, were legal scholars or medical men with strong missionary leanings and learnings because to Said "most of them were imbued with the dual purpose of investigating the sciences and arts of Asia, with the hope of facilitating ameliorations there and of advancing knowledge and improving the arts at home." (Said *Orientalism*, 79). The imperially-compatible White Western characters like Holmes and Watson were created and employed by the Eurocentric litterateurs to improve "the Orient as a whole, to do what scheming Egyptians, perfidious Chinese, and half-naked Indians could never have done for themselves." (Said *Orientalism*, 90) In spite of all its subversive ingredients like Tonga in *The Sign of Four* or the treacherous Indian sepoys in *The Adventure of the Crooked Man*, the Orient and particularly India is ultimately projected in the *Sherlock Holmes* stories as benign and, more importantly, silent. Tonga, significantly, does not utter a single word, not even when he is shot to death in *The Sign of Four*. In his detective stories, Doyle pits Christianity, identifiably the predominant religion for the colonisers, against the non-Christian faith of the colonised like Hinduism and Islam in *The Sign of Four*, Mormonism in *A Study in Scarlet*, and the Negroid religion in *The Tiger of San Pedro* (Doyle 754). Colonisation, according to Said, involves identification and

creation of religious, commercial, military and cultural interests, and the imperial Christian powers like England and France felt it to be their legitimate interest to safeguard themselves against the faith of the colonised, particularly Islam (Said, *Orientalism* 100). Changing the faith of the colonised individuals served the colonisers because the former, when taught in Christian doctrines, shed their hostility against people not practicing their religion and felt an erroneous religious unity with the colonisers. Even if the colonised people change their faith, the element of mistrust remains with the colonisers to whom, even with all exceptions, a person from the East is “first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental” (Said, *Orientalism* 102).

It is significant that in *Sherlock Holmes* stories the Orientals or individuals connected to the East never use modern scientific gadgets or instruments, and in rare cases like that of the Ghazis who attack Watson at Maiwand with Jezail bullets in *A Study in Scarlet*, use weapons invented or devised by the Europeans (Doyle 13). In *The Sign of Four*, Tonga uses blow darts to kill people, Jonathan Small uses his wooden leg to kill a Pathan, and Mahomet Singh and Abdullah Khan threaten Small with a “great knife” (Doyle 91, 86). In *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Grimes by Roylott, who nurses an affinity for the East, uses a swamp adder to kill his stepdaughter, Julia Stoner. The same, as already mentioned, may be noticed for the criminals in the *Byomkesh Bakshi* narratives. In *Orientalism in Crisis*, Abdel Malek refers to the comparative lack of sophistication in the Oriental gadgets as instances of the time lag between Orientalist Science and that of the material under study (Malek 107-8). The European’s development of science and technology and the Easterners’ underdevelopment in that field had resulted in the latter’s being outstripped (Said, *Orientalism* 65).

Doyle, even in his detective fiction, exhibits a willingness to rule and discipline the natives, particularly those from Asia and Africa. To Howe, “The idea of empire has...usually been associated with European, White rule over non-Europeans, with ‘racial’ hierarchies and racist beliefs” (Howe 16). Doyle’s insistence might be explained by his faulty perception that the colonised Easterners “have never understood the meaning of self-government” which the European colonisers characteristically do (Said, *Orientalism* 107). He also thus undertakes the task of transporting the underdeveloped empire into modernity. Said has, however, detected in such attitudes as Doyle’s a sense of power to resurrect and create the Orient (Said, *Orientalism*, 121). Holmes’s rationality and *Orientalist* knowledge acquired through scientific experiments, reading newspaper reports and journals on the Orient, and through “lexicography, grammar, translation and cultural decoding” have not only made him a “central authority for the Orient” (Said, *Orientalism*, 121-2) but also the Orient’s principles have perceptively become his.

Orientalism outlines the importance of pilgrimages to the Orient for the Eurocentric imperialists, including Watson and Holmes. Holmes’s Afro-Asian tour covering Tibet, Persia, Mecca and Khartoum in *The Adventure of the Empty House*, therefore exemplifies Doyle’s another attempt at gaining control of the eastern colonies (Doyle 544).

Said notes that in the early-twentieth century Orientalism delivered the Orient to the West by “translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping” the obscure, barely-intelligible Oriental civilization, and he describes the relationship between an Orientalist and the Orient as “hermeneutical” (Said, *Orientalism* 222). The European approach to the East is identifiably “schizophrenic” and “eccentric” (Said, *Orientalism*, 102) — an attempt to deform the East (Said, *Orientalism*, 273). In the thirty-four *Sherlock Holmes* stories published between 1901 and 1927, beginning with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and continuing up to *The Adventure of the Shoscombe Old Place*, Doyle tries to come at terms with the “chameleon-like quality” and “sublimity” of the Easterners (Said, *Orientalism* 119) by explaining the Oriental “civilizations, religious. dynasties, cultures [...] [and] mentalities” as academic objects (Said, *Orientalism* 222). His unmannerly Orientals like Tonga and Achmet are “simply the old *Orientalist* stereotypes dressed up in policy jargon” (Said, *Orientalism*, 321).

Conception & Construction of Doyle’s Orientalists Texts : As an important colonial literary characteristic feature, the self-definition of the cultures of the natives is suppressed in Doyle. Tonga and Mahomet Singh in *The Sign of Four* and Daulat Ras in *The Adventure of the Three Students* possess no clearly demarcated self-defining culture. Their assertion of identity is prevented because it “can mobilise atavistically, throwing people back to an earlier imperial time when the West and its opponents

championed and even embodied virtues designed not as virtues so to speak but for war” (Said *Culture*, 42). The conception and construction of Doyle’s Orientalist texts was a contemporary Western necessity because of the development of dominant discourses and disciplinary traditions in the canon of modern intellectual history — the intellectual identifiable with the knowledgeable Whites (Said *Culture*, 47). Gauri Viswanathan, in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989), locates the political origin of such English studies and discourses as Doyle’s in the system of colonial education imposed on the natives in nineteenth-century India. The very British Sherlock Holmes stories, was first created by the colonial administrators “for the ideological pacification and reformation of a potentially rebellious Indian population” (Said *Culture*, 48). Such investigation classics as Doyle’s stories are, when reread in the Saidian perspective, remain overwhelmingly Eurocentric and exude “narrow, often strident nationalism” on the part of the author (Said *Culture*, 51).

Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern in Western discourses cannot speak has also been reaffirmed by Said:

Without significant exception, the universalizing discourses of modern Europe [...] assume the silence, willing or otherwise, of the non-European world. There is incorporation; there is inclusion; there is direct rule; there is coercion. But there is only infrequently an acknowledgement that the colonised people should be heard from, their ideas known (Said *Culture*, 58).

The first *Sherlock Holmes* narrative *A Study in Scarlet* was published in 1887 and might be included as a British text written during the age of empire, which Said identifies as beginning around approximately 1878 (Said *Culture*, 68). Under the rules of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) and Edward VII (1901-10), Britain came to regard itself as the most powerful academic, military and economic imperial centre. Under such “authority of the [Western] observer and of European geographical centrality”, the colonised native was reduced to occupy “a secondary racial, cultural, ontological status” (Said *Culture*, 70). The Western fantasy of centrality and superiority of British culture was perpetuated by their obliterations of native cultures. Said’s observation on the assumed centrality of British power suggests that to privilege its own imperial and colonial status, the British culture would readily accept texts affirming its imperial centrality and primacy.

Naturally, Doyle’s detective stories gained unprecedented popularity soon after their first publication. By the time the second *Sherlock Holmes* story *The Sign of Four* was published (in October 1890), a number of options, all premised upon the subordination and victimisation of the Eastern natives, had been made available to the Europeans, including its supporter Doyle. That included delight in the usage of power to rule the natives and secure profit from distant territories through voyages, trade, annexation and learned expedition and exhibitions, “an ideological rationale for reducing (and) reconstituting the native as someone to be ruled and managed”, the security of the situation that allows the conquerors to overlook the violence perpetrated by themselves and the process “by which, after the natives have been displaced from their historic location on their land, their history is rewritten as a function of the imperial one” (Said *Culture*, 158-9).

The two aspects that Doyle had written the *Sherlock Holmes* stories first in the English language, and second, in Britain, are also important to account for his imperial approach. This lingua franca, which Doyle employs in his *Sherlock Holmes* texts, locates England at the focal point of “a world also presided over by its power, illuminated by its ideas and culture, kept productive by the attitudes of its moral teachers, artists, legislators” (Said *Culture*, 123)

III. CONCLUSION:

Doyle’s conception of the *Orientalist* investigator at the end of the nineteenth century conforms to Said’s observation that “by the end of the nineteenth century the empire is no longer merely a shadowy presence but in the works of writers like Conrad, Kipling, Gide, [...] Loti [and Doyle], a central area of concern” (Said, *Culture* xviii). Also, the definitions of imperialism and colonialism are intermingled in the Sherlock Holmes stories (Said, *Culture* 8). The White Eurocentric Holmes advocates the British occupation and rule of the South Asian and African countries while being ensconced in the imperial centre of London. The amalgamation of imperialism and colonialism in the social as well as literary context between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in the creation of a “socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England [...] [which was] connected by design, motive and development to distant or peripheral worlds [...] conceived of as desirable but subordinate [...]” (Said

Culture, 61). Western powers like Britain allowed their metropolises to acquire and accumulate territory and subjects on a very fast scale, and by 1914 “Europe had a grand total of roughly eighty-five per cent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions and commonwealths” (Said, *Culture* 6). Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* narratives only reflect the writer’s satisfaction with the power of English imperialism in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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